Lower Anxiety in Class Could Be Expected to Have Improved English Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this research is to investigate the factor(s) of improving the English proficiency of university students in student-centered communicative English lessons in Japan.

Design: Eighty-eight Japanese college freshmen completed the questionnaire at the seventh lesson out of 14 lessons of a semester. Students took tests (TOEIC IP) before and after the semester to check their progress on English proficiency.

Methods: A logistic regression analysis was applied to detect potential factor(s) involved in the change of their TOEIC scores, based on the following six independent variables: affective components (enjoyment and anxiety), language components (study abroad experience, speaking time, and study time), and a demographic component (gender).

Result: The factor that led to the improvement of English proficiency after the course was that students were less anxious at the middle of the semester.

Conclusion: The present study suggests that the levels of anxiety could affect the improvement of students' English proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the globalization of society, the teaching of English in Japan has gradually shifted from the grammar-translation method to the inclusion of communicative methods[1]. In order to increase the exposure of the target language (TL) and to improve students' English proficiency, many Japanese universities have adopted an English-only rule in communicative English lessons, which is one cause of students' anxiety in foreign-language classrooms (FLCA)[2].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have shown that students' performances could improve if their levels of anxiety were decreased[3]. In fact, Dordinejad and Ahmadabad[4] reported that students with low levels of anxiety had high achievements in English. Therefore, researchers have focused on decreasing levels of anxiety for improving students' TL proficiency. Although second language acquisition (SLA) research has mainly investigated negative emotions such as anxiety, some researchers have recently extended the study to include positive emotion like foreign language enjoyment (FLE)[5]. They were pioneers of the positive psychology movement, assumed that, if students enjoyed the experience of learning a TL, their anxiety decreased, which will improve their TL proficiency. Actually, Dewaele and Alfawzan[6] found that advanced-level students experienced high levels of enjoyment and low levels of anxiety. Saito *et al.*[7] concluded that the regular and frequent use of a TL while

experiencing enjoyable feelings could promote SLA, decrease anxiety, and improve overall proficiency in the TL. Enjoyable lessons are likely to have the benefit of decreasing students' anxiety and improving their English proficiency.

Regarding gender differences, Dewaele *et al.*[8] found that males were less emotional than were females in terms of both anxiety and enjoyment, and that these two emotions complemented one another when students were getting some linguistic progress. On the other hand, Saito and Samimy[9] stated that males were afraid of making mistakes, experienced a strong fear of being assessed negatively, and had lower self-perceived ability to speak TL, which made their performance bad. Considering these results, no significant relationship between gender, anxiety and TL performance was not concluded yet. Moreover, Hernandez[10] reported that students improved TL speaking proficiency during study abroad experience of one semester. It seems that if students have more opportunities to speak English, their speaking proficiency will improve. In terms of the skills of TL, Hossein[11] found that all four skills such as speaking, listening, writing, and reading were closely related each other. That is, if students improve one of the skills, that positive influence will develop other skills as well. Regarding study hour of university students, Plant *et al.*[12] found that the quality of study time could be a stronger predictor than the amount of study in order to obtain higher academic grades, while Lahmers and Zulauf[13] reported that the amount of study time was important for increasing grades.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Participants

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min. - Max.
Enjoyment	30.25	4.795	15 - 40
Anxiety	24.57	5.058	10 - 36
Study abroad experience (days)	74.75	325.697	0 - 1825
Speaking opportunities (hours)	.88	1.182	0 - 4
After school study (hours)	1.25	.950	0 - 5
TOEIC score before the semester	446.70	116.742	220 - 870
TOEIC score after the semester	425.74	126.463	200 - 795
Valid N (listwise)			

Note. The range of enjoyment and anxiety, from 8 (minimum) to 40 (maximum) respectively; TOEIC score, from 5 to 495 for the Listening Section; 5 to 495 for the Reading Section; 10 to 990 for a total score.

Table 2: The Results of the Logistic Regression Analysis.

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
FLCA (anxiety)	.131	.055	5.643	1	.018	1.140	1.023	1.271
FLE (enjoyment)	-.018	.053	.109	1	.741	.983	.885	1.091
Study abroad experience	.000	.001	.409	1	.522	1.000	.999	1.002
Speaking opportunities	.073	.201	.132	1	.716	1.076	.725	1.596
After school study	.077	.249	.095	1	.758	1.080	.663	1.760
Gender	.433	.486	.796	1	.372	1.543	.595	3.998
Constant	-3.562	2.392	2.218	1	.136	.028		

Note: B, partial regression coefficient; S.E., standard error; Wald, wald test; df, degree of freedom; Sig., significant level; Exp(B), exponentiation of the B coefficient (odds ratio); C.I., confidence interval.

A RESEARCH QUESTION

Although the dynamic nature of enjoyment and anxiety has been investigated in the literature, few studies have focused on the relationship between the improvement of English proficiency of Japanese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) college students and their levels of enjoyment and anxiety. This research also included other factors such as gender, study abroad experience, weekly opportunities to speak English outside of class, and weekly after-school English study time. The present study examined:

What factor(s) could affect the improvement of students' English proficiency in communicative English lessons at a Japanese university?

METHODS

Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted after an approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of a university in Japan. Written, informed consent was received from all participants. Participants were informed that their anonymity was guaranteed, and that they were able to ask questions about the survey and to withdraw from it at any time.

Participants

Eighty-eight freshmen (58 Japanese males and 30 Japanese females: Japanese L1, English L2) at a Japanese university participated. The Japanese researcher, a bilingual Japanese/English instructor, taught three EFL classes at an equivalent English level based on the students scores on a TOEIC IP (Institutional Program of Test of English for International Communication) administered before the class commenced. The students' levels of base-line English proficiency judged by the TOEIC IP ranged from 220 to 870 (median 420).

Setting

The course investigated was a required, English class for freshmen that focused on the development of the students' communicative skills, particularly listening and speaking. A textbook, lesson plan, homework, and tests were the same in all the three classes. The students learned English using the textbook that contained practice in vocabulary, phrases and idioms, pronunciation, grammar, listening comprehension on English conversations, short reading comprehension, and express or exchange their own opinions in English about what they listen to with classmates in pairs or groups. The teacher implemented the system in which students raised their hands and were given points when they answered in order to encourage students' active participation in class.

Questionnaire

The levels of enjoyment and anxiety were assessed using a questionnaire adapted from the questionnaire compiled by Dewaele et al.[14] The eight items pertaining to FLE were taken from an enjoyment questionnaire[15], and included three dimensions of foreign language enjoyment: social versus private, a teacher-controlled versus peer-controlled, and comfortable atmosphere in foreign language (FL) classrooms. The other eight items were drawn from an anxiety scale[16], and included three dimensions of foreign language classroom anxiety: insufficient confidence, nervousness, and anxiety. A five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neither agree nor disagree = 3, agree = 4, to strongly agree = 5 was used, with lower total scores indicating lower levels in each category. The wording for the eight items that assessed enjoyment and anxiety and required Likert-scale answers was reversed to ensure that the objective of the research was not detected by the research participants, and that they had completed the task correctly. Later, the eight reverse-worded items were adjusted when recorded in an Excel file. The five background information items were students identification number, gender, study abroad experience (days), weekly opportunities to speak English outside of class (hours), and weekly after-school English study time (hours) (see the appendix).

Data Collection

The questionnaire in this study was distributed within a class time after the seventh lesson out of 14 lessons of a semester. Students were asked about their genuine feelings and experiences from the beginning of the class to that point (for about two months). The students completed the questionnaire in class within approximately 10 minutes to maximize the response rate.

Data Analysis

A logistic regression analysis was performed to find out the factor(s) that could affect students' TOEIC IP score (a dependent variable), based on the following potential independent variables: gender, the levels of enjoyment, the levels of anxiety, study abroad experience (days), weekly opportunities to speak English outside of class (hours), and weekly after-school English study time (hours). The statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS statistical package advanced version 23. $P < 0.05$ was considered significant.

RESULTS

Validity of the Likert Scale

Cronbach's alphas for the eight items of enjoyment and those for the eight items of anxiety were 0.88 and 0.80, respectively.

Characteristics of Participants

Descriptive statistics of the participants were shown in Table 1. The students' levels of English proficiency after the semester on TOEIC IP ranged from 200 to 795 (median 427.5). 25% of the students (22 out of 88) had studied abroad for one week or more. 45.5% of the students (40 out of 88) had opportunities to speak English out of class over one hour per week. 11.3% of the students (23 out of 88) studied after school over two hours per week.

Logistic regression analysis

The change of students' TOEIC IP scores was associated significantly with the levels of anxiety ($p = .018$). A one-point higher score in anxiety multiplies the odds of losing the test score on TOEIC IP by 1.14 (exp (0.131)). Other variables were excluded by the analysis (see Table 2).

The statistical result indicated that the students, who had high anxiety in the middle stage of the semester, decreased their TOEIC IP score after all.

DISCUSSION

The results of the questionnaire research suggest that students with lower levels of anxiety in class is significantly associated with the improvement of their English proficiency. That is, low levels of anxiety might be a key factor in improving students' English proficiency. This is in line with the opinion that anxiety is correlated significantly and negatively with the overall ability in a foreign language[3,4]. As some researchers[5,6,9] have said, the results that students increased enjoyment, decreased anxiety, and improved English proficiency would be ideal, but the result in this study showed that the levels of enjoyment were not associated with higher English proficiency.

Moreover, the results also reveals that there was not any significance on the relationship between English proficiency and gender, study abroad experience, weekly English speaking opportunities, and weekly after-school study hours. The TOEIC IP test is a test of English listening and reading (include vocabulary and grammar) skills and the students acquired listening, speaking, and reading skills in class. Therefore, what the students learned in class would have been reflected in their performance on the TOEIC IP test. As for whether study abroad experience increases students' English proficiency, the result was not significant because there were a few students who had studied abroad, and even if they had, it was only for a very short period. The numbers of hours students spoke or studied English after school was also not significantly related to the increase in their English proficiency. Those may be due to the facts that 1) the average hour of speaking opportunities outside the classroom was less than one hour and the number of students who practiced speaking over one hour per week was small; 2) the average hour of after-school study was about one hour and the number of students who studied for more than two hours per week was small.

With regard to the limitations of this study, the use of a small sample means that the result is vulnerable to statistical bias. Second, the participants were Japanese college freshmen whose English proficiency was limited to beginner to intermediate. Thus, the findings might not be generalizable to other EFL settings and other levels of students. One possible cause of the unexpected result concerning the decrease in students' average TOEIC scores and no contribution of enjoyment for English proficiency improvement might have been the introduction of a system in which students raised their hands and were given points when they answered, which may have increased the anxiety of the students. Those limitations may explain the differences between the results of this study and those of some others in the literature. Thus, further research could consider increasing the number of participants, performing replication studies in other EFL classrooms in Japan or other countries, or with advanced-level students. Moreover, in order to promote students' enjoyment, it may be better not to use the point system and to encourage students to take part actively in lessons in other ways.

CONCLUSION

The results of the current study revealed that the levels of anxiety could affect the improvement of students' English proficiency. If teachers can lower students' anxiety in class, their English proficiency could improve.

APPENDIX

Five-point Likert scale questionnaire items

1. I get bored in the English class.
2. I enjoy the English class.
3. I am a worthy member of the English class.
4. In the English class, I don't feel proud of my accomplishments.
5. It's cool to know English.
6. The peers are not nice in the English class.
7. There is a good atmosphere in the English class.
8. We don't laugh a lot in the English class.

1. Although I am well prepared for the English class, I feel anxious in the class.
2. I always feel that other students speak English better than I do.
3. I don't feel my heart pounding when I am called on in the English class.
4. I don't worry about making mistakes in the English class.
5. I feel confident when I speak in the English class.
6. I don't get nervous and confused when I am speaking in the English class.
7. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the English class.
8. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in the English class.

Background information

1. Identification number:
2. Gender:
3. The number of day(s) of study abroad experience: _____ day(s)
4. Average number of hour(s) to speak English out of class per week: _____ hour(s)
5. Average number of hour(s) to study English after school (except speaking) per week: _____ hour(s)

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